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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000984

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/18/2017

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SUBJECT: CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER LAYS OUT PLAN FOR  
ELECTIONS BY END-2008

Classified By: Amb. Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The Election Commission is preparing to announce a roadmap for elections in mid-July. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Huda clarified the role of the army in the voter registration process, discussed how planning for the registration process was proceeding, and assured the Ambassador they had a "Plan B" to ensure that nation-wide parliamentary elections are held by end-2008 even if the new photo voter list is not completed in time. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On June 13, the Ambassador held a farewell meeting with Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda. POLOFF attended as notetaker. She began the meeting complimenting Huda for his leadership and the transparency of the Election Commission since he took over in February.

VOTER LIST PILOT UNDERWAY

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13. (SBU) Huda explained the Commission's approach to preparing the new voter list with photographs. Most decisions regarding preparing the list have been made; on June 10, the Commission, working closely with the army, began a three-week registration pilot test in the village of Sreepur north of Dhaka. The goal of the pilot is to determine the correct combination of procedures and technology to minimize the amount of time it will take to register an individual, and to see if the sequencing of steps is correct. The data collection methodology was developed by a team of UNDP-funded consultants.

"ROADMAP" IN MID-JULY

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14. (SBU) According to Huda, after observing the pilot the UNDP team will submit a preliminary report to the Commission. This will serve as the basis of a "roadmap to elections" that the CEC will announce publicly by mid-July. The consultants will submit a final, detailed project document, including procurement needs, by the end of July.

ROLE OF ARMY BEING REDUCED

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15. (C) Huda said the army was assisting with the pilot, but that the Commission is in overall control. The army initially got involved in the voter registration process in January, when it contracted with firms to develop the necessary software for a new enumeration. It applied institutional knowledge of registration efforts, including

military peacekeeping experience with voter registration operations in the Congo and Sierra Leone. On May 13, the army gave a demonstration to the caretaker advisers and Election Commission of the test software.

¶6. (C) After the demonstration, Huda told Chief of Army Staff General MA Moeen there was a role for the army "to keep things organized," but the Election Commission now needed to assume responsibility for the registration process. Moeen resisted initially, but Huda insisted, and the Chief Adviser backed him. Eventually, the army agreed to work under the Commission on this project.

#### NEXT STEPS =====

¶7. (SBU) After the Sreepur pilot is completed, the Election Commission plans to move on to two cities, Rajshahi and Khulna. The plan is to complete registration and hold city corporation elections in those two cities by the end of 2007. Huda said it was important to hold elections of some sort by the end of the year to provide a tangible sign to the public that the Commission is working as quickly as possible to prepare the country for national elections. After Rajshahi and Khulna, he plans to move on to Dhaka in early 2008.

#### A "PLAN B" =====

¶8. (C) The Ambassador asked how confident Huda was that the voter list would be ready in time for parliamentary elections by the end of 2008. Huda said he was "still sure" it would be done in time, but he also said the Commission has a "Plan

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B."

¶9. (C) The Election Commission has prioritized which areas of the country need to be registered first, based on where voter fraud has been greatest. These areas will be done first, with those with less past voter fraud being done later. The Commission will assess the situation in summer 2008. If registration has only been done in two-thirds of the country, elections can still be held -- the worst problem areas will have elections using the new list, and the better areas will conduct elections with some form of an updated old list. The voter list with photographs will be completed in those areas after the elections. "Regardless, we will have elections by the end of 2008," Huda assured us.

#### COMMISSION'S INDEPENDENCE "RESOLVED" =====

¶10. (SBU) Huda said the President would soon sign an ordinance separating the Election Commission from the Prime Minister's (now Chief Adviser's) Office. The lack of independence of the Commission -- in spite of a constitutional provision -- had become a major concern of the donor community, and the Chief Adviser "strongly supported" the separation.

#### POLITICAL PARTY REFORM =====

¶11. (SBU) The Ambassador praised Huda for his public calls for a lift on the ban on indoor politics and reiterated her support for this as well. Although the Commission could still meet with party members, Huda noted the parties could not meet to agree on common positions as long as the ban was in effect. Huda said it was up to the government and military when the ban would be lifted, but "the time might not be right" now given the recent wave of arrests. He expressed the hope it would be lifted sometime in the next two months.

COMMENT

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¶12. (C) Huda's statements were the clearest assurance yet the Election Commission plans to lead the country to elections by end-2008. The CEC was well-versed in the complexities of the voter registration process, and in the rare instance he did not know the answer to a question, he was willing to admit it. Most significantly, this is the first time anyone from the government has discussed a back-up plan should the voter list take longer than planned.

BUTENIS